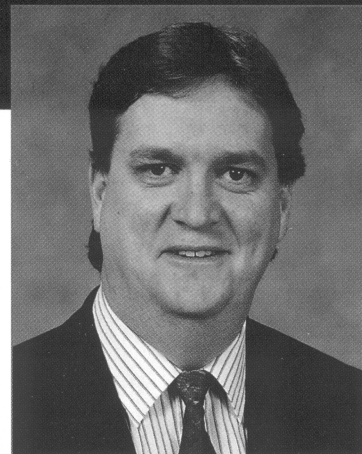




Surfing the Net for What Ails You

The Internet emerges as powerful resource for medical matters

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Health care in Canada is in transition because of shrinking government budgets. Yet there is a more subtle, and perhaps more far-reaching change, occurring as people take time to learn more about health issues in general and their own health in particular.

Consumer-oriented health shows such as Doctor on Call abound on TV. Health and wellness publications overflow magazine racks. Bookstores stock medical guides ranging from the simple to the complex. Newspapers devote increasing space to health topics.

Now the Internet is starting to play a significant role in helping you get more information about your own health.

Used properly, the Internet can be a powerful ally for someone eager to learn more about a medical condition. I certainly found that in my case.

Last January, I was stricken with Bell's palsy, a temporary condition that shuts down the muscles in half of your face. It is not life-threatening, but certainly irritating. And because of the facial disfigurement, it presents you with some pretty hefty emotional challenges.

Throughout the month or so I was affected, I used the Internet extensively to learn more about the condition. I

found that when dealing with my doctor, I was able to ask some pretty pointed questions. The Internet made me much better informed on what was happening to my body and on possible treatments.

Also, an Internet search engine (AltaVista) led me to an online discussion forum specifically for those with Bell's palsy. It was as though I had walked into a room full of people in the same state I was. I spent an hour browsing hundreds of items posted in the past several months, and started to feel some confidence, even as my condition worsened.

If you know what you are doing, you can find a lot of useful, easy to understand health care information about thousands of different medical topics in just a few minutes.

Start out at a site like FamilyInternet, for example, which is definitely aimed at average folk. Click on the health category, choose a topic, and you'll find several pages of consumer-friendly information. Your child has an ear infection? Choose that topic and you can quickly get a very good synopsis about the condition. But it doesn't stop there - you'll also be provided with links to other Web sites that contain extensive information about ear infections.

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Quickly, you'll find yourself on Web sites of organizations such as the US-based National Institutes of Health. It features an excellent patient information guide. The Eustachian Tube Dysfunction site at the University of Illinois has a page about "middle ear fluid in young children." You'll discover other information on ear infections from the American Academy of Family Physicians' Health information site. You may even find enlightenment at the Mayo Clinic about the condition.

In a matter of minutes, you'll have gained a lot of useful insight.

Family Internet is one example of the many consumer-friendly health services available on the Internet. Other good starting points include HealthyWay from Sympatico, HealthAnswers and Medicon-sult.

There are many obvious limitations, too.

Don't try to use the Internet to diagnose a medical condition. As tempting as this new world of information can be, you must keep in mind that since you aren't a medical professional, you don't have the skills, knowledge or judgment to properly assess your condition. Your family doctor is - and must remain - the primary individual responsible for your health care. Remember that while there is a lot of good health information online, there's also a lot of bad stuff. Medical professionals are rightly concerned that the Internet contains fraudulent, misleading or simply incorrect medical information. For example, the first bit of advice I saw in the discussion group was from a dentist who said Bell's palsy can be caught by driving with your window open, a hypothesis not accepted by the medical profession.

Also, there is an overwhelming amount of US-oriented health information, some of which may not apply to the Canadian system. The same discussion group "expert" suggested visiting a neurologist for diagnosis of Bell's palsy. But the US insurance and medical/legal systems create unnecessary expectations that people should see specialists for everything, which is not the case in Canada.

You'll find the Internet is increasingly populated by a new type of snake-oil salesman. Sadly, all too many individuals and companies are eager to sell you some type of quack cure. In my own case, I was soon deluged with a flood of offers of "awesome new vitamins", which would fix my Bell's palsy just like that.

Some medical professionals are concerned that companies selling drugs have created Web sites that are

too enthusiastic for their own products and give too little information about alternatives. Consider the Anxiety Relief Center site, created by drug company Bristol Myers Squibb, which focuses on a product called BuSpar sold in the United States. Treat the information on the site as you would the information in any marketing brochure.

Despite all my cautionary words, I am a fan of the Internet as a health care resource for average Canadians. The range and depth of health care topics on the Internet is nothing less than stunning. ☺

Healthy sites

Some starting points for healthcare information.

- FamilyInternet - www.familyinternet.com
- HealthyWay - healthyway.sympatico.ca
- HealthAnswers - www.healthanswers.com
- HealthWorld Online - www.healthynet
- Healthfinder - www.healthfinder.gov
- Mediconsult.com - www.mediconsult.com

On-line tips

Ten questions to ask when evaluating online information.

1. Does the person or organization who created the site have a reputable track record?
2. Do the site creators list their credentials?
3. Is the information on the site subject to some type of review process?
4. Does the site seem to be professionally maintained, or does it seem thrown together?
5. Is the site referenced by other reputable sites?
6. Does the information seem too good to be true?
7. Can you back up the information with other independent sources?
8. Is the site updated frequently?
9. Does the site simply seem to want your money?
10. Are there any news reports available about the initiative?